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Policy Rationales for Electronic Information Systems: An Area of Ambiguity

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Abstract

Child welfare and protection (CWP) has engaged in the introduction of Electronic Information Systems (EIS), such as electronic recording, assessment and decision-making tools. It has been argued that EIS have adverse consequences in which governments are conceived as homogeneous entities that install EIS for self-interested purposes. Consequently, research focuses on how social workers evade/reshape the sometimes pernicious effects of EIS. Insufficient attention has been given to the governmental perspective and to why governments install EIS. In this article, we contribute to this debate by performing semi-structured interviews with policy actors (directors, policy advisers and staff members) in the field of CWP in Flanders. Asked about their rationales for installing EIS, they spoke of administrative, policy, care and economic reasons. However, while advocating these EIS, they also expressed a critical attitude concerning the usefulness of EIS, hoping that practitioners would move back and forth between governmental demands and day-to-day realities, to establish a more responsive social work. This ambiguous situation in which policy makers seem to be both strong supporters and critics of EIS at the same time is captivating, since it seems no longer necessary to perceive governments as a homogeneous bogeyman and social work as a victim.

Keywords: Electronic Information Systems, child welfare and protection, ICT, governmental rationales, qualitative methods

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Introduction

In many Western countries, child welfare and protection (CWP) has recently engaged in the enhanced introduction of what we call, following Gillingham (2013, 2014*a*), Electronic Information Systems (EIS). This concept refers to a great diversity of heterogeneous tools that are used to record and process information, assess the needs of children, provide direction for decision-making procedures and/or to create a digital recording platform for casework and so on. This development has in the UK, for instance, led to the use of the Integrated Children System (ICS) (an information-sharing tool which should help to signal children at risk) and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) (a standard assessment tool to be used by all practitioners in the field of CWP) (White *et al.*, 2009). Other examples include the National Reference Index for High-Risk Youngsters (VIR) that has been developed as an information-sharing tool which enables the signalling of children who are at risk in the Netherlands (Lecluijze *et al.*, 2015).

The use of such EIS within social work practice is not necessarily new, but the claim that these tools will contribute to a more transparent and more responsive CWP system has gained a much greater significance in recent years (Bradt *et al.*, 2011). At the same time, there is a growing body of literature which illuminates how these tools have adverse consequences, such as squeezing out social workers' discretion (see Aas, 2004; Aronson and Smith, 2009; Parton, 2006). In contemporary research on this topic, there is a tendency to focus either on the development of a better implementation process of EIS (e.g. De Witte *et al.*, 2015; Gillingham, 2014*b*) or on the strategies of managers and practitioners to evade and/or reshape the pernicious effects of these tools (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010). Although these insights are valuable to our discussion and the broader debate concerning the use of EIS in social work, it is our contention that research has given insufficient attention to the governmental perspective. Questions on the reasons for governmental policy makers to install these EIS and their rationales and ambitions are often ignored. In previous research, we analysed Flemish policy documents from 1999 until 2014 relating to the subject of EIS in the field of CWP. This study revealed three main clusters of governmental rationales for installing EIS in the Flemish CWP system: (i) a better match of care supply and care demand, (ii) the enhancement of legitimation and accountability and (iii) the creation of a more uniform CWP system. However, through this document analysis, we were unable to capture or draw conclusions concerning the diversity of motives, views and rationales from policy makers themselves, although these might actually provide important in-depth explanations of the governmental rationales for contributing to the development of installing EIS, not least

since policy documents are often written to communicate broad information to other policy makers as well as society. In that vein, policy documents tend to be rather vague and superficial (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998), while we are also looking for in-depth explanations and rationales from policy makers at first hand. In doing so, we emphasise that it is not the contention of this article to study specific EIS and their own specific rationales such as a decision-making tool or an assessment tool. We rather want to capture the generic policy rationales regarding the broad governmental movement towards EIS, bearing in mind the existing diversity of EIS in the field of CWP.

Therefore, in the first part of this article, we provide an overview of the ongoing debate regarding the use of EIS in social work. In the second, we identify and capture this existing gap in contemporary literature by focusing on the diversity of rationales from the policy makers themselves and the meaning of these rationales for social work and CWP in particular.

The debate on EIS in social work

A managerial tendency

When seeking rationales for the enhanced importance of EIS in social work, several authors refer to an increased market-oriented governmental context in which Western social work has been operating over the last few decades (Aronson and Smith, 2010; Parton, 2006). This development, often referred to as managerialism, has been perceived as a pragmatic response to new challenges in contemporary society (Coleman and Harris, 2008) and has been augmented by the increasingly poor economic circumstances of the last few years (Taylor, 2009). It highlights managerial ideologies and organisational mechanisms that—so it is argued—can be facilitated through the use of EIS (Gillingham, 2013). In this context, data gathered by these systems are often used by governments to assess the efficiency of social work organisations (Tregeagle and Darcy, 2008), for audit and monitoring purposes (Peckover *et al.*, 2009), to create more transparency (Aronson and Smith, 2009; Coleman and Harris, 2008) and to measure the results of social work interventions (Van Yperen, 2013). Furthermore, scholars have argued that these EIS are also used for other managerial objectives such as performance measurements (Aronson and Smith, 2010; Taylor, 2009) by which practitioners are required to measure actual improvements in people's lives, based on what is efficient (what actions are likely to produce the most good for the least cost) rather than on what is effective (what actions are likely to work well) (Banks, 2013).

The social worker as a tweet-level bureaucrat

At first glance, the idea of increasing the quality of CWP by enhancing efficiency, saving public money, creating transparency and as such measuring the outcomes and improvements of interventions through the installation of EIS is very appealing. However, among many professional practitioners, academics and researchers, there has been growing concern about this development. Several scholars have argued that, when EIS are combined with the current governmental managerial context, they may not just support managerial goals (Tregeagle and Darcy, 2008) but, in doing so, they may change some of the central characteristics of social work as a profession (see Aas, 2004; Bovens and Zouridis, 2002; Garrett, 2005). For instance, research elucidates how EIS tend to split the holistic view of a client's life story by separating and disintegrating the familial, relational and social aspects of their lives (Hall *et al.*, 2010) to fit into preordained text fields (Aas, 2004; Hill and Shaw, 2011; White *et al.*, 2009). As a result, information that 'cannot be squeezed into the required format disappears or gets lost' (Parton, 2006, p. 262). This not only leads to a reduction of the complexity of social problems (Aronson and Smith, 2009; Garrett, 2005; Parton, 2008), but also undermines the importance of narratives in social work practice (Aas, 2004; Hill and Shaw, 2011; Parton, 2008), keeping in mind that these narratives 'provide a sense of coherence and continuity' in a client's life story (Aas, 2004, p. 387). Furthermore, research on front line social work illuminates how, as a result of EIS, practitioners are reduced to technicians as their discretionary margin might be squeezed out (Aronson and Smith, 2010; Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010; Coleman and Harris, 2008; White *et al.*, 2009). In that vein, Bovens and Zouridis (2002) argue that the *street-level bureaucrat* is being transformed into a *screen-level bureaucrat*, referring to someone who mostly operates behind his computer screen and whose contact with clients runs solely through or in the presence of a computer screen. In our view, such a professional could even be called a *tweet-level bureaucrat*, as s/he has to fill in all kinds of preordained and text-limited boxes. As a result, social work is positioned in a precarious space of tension between *doing the things right*—filling in EIS according to governmental standard procedures—and *doing the right things*—engaging meaningfully in a relationship with clients and their context.

The government as a bogeyman

Here, social work often conceives the government as a monolithic, coherent and homogeneous entity (Thoenig, 2011)—a bogeyman who installs EIS purely for self-interested purposes. At the same time, research has taught us how practitioners and managers develop strategies

to exercise their discretion and stand against these governmental expectations (Bovens and Zouridis, 2002; De Witte *et al.*, 2015). There are, for instance, many illustrations of how practitioners evaded governmental regulations, manipulated diagnostic criteria (Aronson and Smith, 2009), underutilised the possibilities of EIS (Carrilio, 2008) and even used their own paper-based methods (De Witte *et al.*, 2015), while managers developed their own alternative versions of the system (Aronson and Smith, 2009) or 'worked around' the designed system (Pithouse *et al.*, 2012).

However, as already argued, these insights are very valuable, but pay insufficient attention to the rationales of policy makers. Therefore, in the next section, we explore this issue through a study of policy makers in the field of CWP in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). Flanders is a compelling case in relation to this debate, as it is facing a profound reform of the CWP system in which the use of EIS is considered pivotal to improve the quality of the CWP system. This has led to the introduction of (i) BINC, a digital platform for recording information about service users by which the government tries to capture what is happening within the field of CWP; (ii) DOMINO, a digital platform for monitoring case trajectories and making assessments by which the government tries to capture the trajectories of clients and streamline decision-making procedures and (iii) INSISTO, a tool for risk assessment and to provide access to non-directly accessible CWP (e.g. a centre for youngsters with severe behavioural problems). Through these data, the government is attempting to solve the lack of capacity and long waiting lists for children in need of support by strictly regulating the number of clients entering non-directly accessible CWP. In doing so, the Flemish government claims that these EIS will solve the striking gaps and overlaps in the provision of services as well as the ineffectiveness and inefficiency in the Flemish CWP system.

Methodological framework

The findings are the result of a qualitative study performed between September 2014 and April 2015. The research approach consisted of qualitative semi-structured interviews—a method which is considered extremely valuable to explore the views and experiences of individuals on specific matters (Gill *et al.*, 2008), such as the rationales of key policy actors concerning the use of EIS. As such, these interviews provided ample opportunity to explore in depth the rationales of the participants involved.

In Flanders, each minister has his own cabinet and administration, completed with a number of agencies which are responsible for the coordination of the policy (Verhoest *et al.*, 2014). As such, the cabinet, together

Table 1. Interview scheme

Opening questions	(1) Could you tell me a bit more about yourself and your job? (2) How are you involved in the policy process of developing and implementing Electronic Information Systems (EIS)?
Transitionary questions	(3) How would you describe an EIS? Are they all the same? (4) Could you give me some background about the history of these EIS in Flemish CWP?
Key and concluding questions	(5) What is the importance as well as the purpose of these EIS? (6) In your opinion, how do professionals and middle managers handle these EIS? (7) How does policy cope with the criticism, given by researchers and professionals, concerning these EIS? (8) To date, a lot of practitioners in the field of Flemish CWP have expressed a questioning and critical attitude towards the implanted EIS. How would you convince them to use these EIS?

with the administration and the agencies, are considered to be the main players in the policy-making process and in the coordination and implementation of that same policy. In relation to the Flemish CWP, the cabinet of the Minister of Welfare, Public Health and Family, his administration and the Child Welfare and Protection Agency, the Flemish Agency for Disabled People and Child and Family Agency are therefore seen as key players within the policy-making process. Based on this information and the information we gathered on the specific policy actors involved in the introduction and implementation of several EIS in Flanders, we selected and approached the most relevant actors through purposeful sampling (Polit and Beck, 2004). In turn, these participants pointed out several other relevant actors, who were invited to participate via snowball sampling. In that vein, eighteen individuals were invited to participate as research informants based on their role as a member of the cabinet, the administration or one of the three above-mentioned agencies. Fifteen of them—three members of the administration and twelve members of the several agencies—accepted the invitation, covering a variety of jobs such as managing director(s), policy advisers and staff members. Despite several attempts, no member of the cabinet participated in the research. All interviewees were invited to participate on the basis of written informed consent and were also informed of their right to withdraw during the interview process. The participants were assured that the collected data such as quotes would be fully anonymised and the names of third parties and institutions excised. The study proposal was reviewed and approved in line with the Ghent University research ethics guidelines. All interviews took place at the workplace of the participants, lasted for approximately one hour and were based on the same interview

scheme (Mortelmans, 2007), which consisted of the main questions shown in Table 1.

By consistently using this scheme, the interview sought to balance thematic structure with sufficient room for the participants to elaborate on their own perspectives (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006; Gill *et al.*, 2008). All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Afterwards, a critical reading and iterative (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006) coding process was initiated by the first author with the help of NVivo10 (Mortelmans, 2007), based on some codes drafted after a first reading of the interviews (e.g. conceptual ideas, ways of handling, reasons for installation and advantages, reflections). Data that could not be identified based on these codes were marked with a new code (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This identification and analysis was checked and validated by the second author to enhance the credibility of the data. This allowed us to identify, interpret and re-interpret important topics and patterns throughout the analysis in a consistent and reliable manner.

In what follows, we present the findings of our analysis by elaborating and discussing the different rationales regarding the development towards the installation of EIS within the Flemish CWP as well as by illustrating our findings with quotes from the analysed interviews.

Findings

Throughout the interviews, some policy makers described the straightforward ambition that, by installing EIS, they sought to improve the quality of the CWP system. According to them, 'there is even scientific evidence that shows that the quality of care increases, just by taking a step back and thinking about what you have to register' (4/5). At the same time, some of their colleagues criticised this—what they described as an instrumental view on CWP—as they were particularly concerned about a policy that marginalised the relational aspect of CWP, while this remains a focal point of the whole CWP process. In the words of an interviewee:

> Yes, these tools can contribute to a better understanding. But the most important aspect remains the relationship between the client and his/her practitioner. That what happens in the dialogue between them, in that therapeutical process, should always outweigh the instrumental (13).

A persistent concern throughout the analysis, however, is that it remains difficult to deepen this notion of quality. In other words, it remains unclear what policy makers define as *increasing quality* and, as such, there is rarely any articulation of how this might be achieved. Therefore, in the next section, we present three themes emanating from our data

that reveal glimpses of what is meant by increasing the quality of CWP through the use of EIS.

Increasing efficiency

The first theme that comes to the fore throughout our data is in line with earlier research (Devlieghere and Roose, 2015) and relates to the rationale of the Flemish government that EIS will increase the efficiency of the CWP system, the CWP organisations and the social work interventions practitioners are carrying out on a daily basis. In doing so, policy makers often argue that EIS will better match the care supply (amount of care available) and care demand (amount of care requested) and balance and avoid unnecessary investments in what they describe as non-working methods. Also, according to some of the participants, EIS will speed up the CWP process—an argument that is aptly illustrated by one of the participants who makes a comparison with the online hotel reservation system Booking.com when asked how these EIS can contribute to accessing the CWP system more smoothly:

> I think you have to take a look at the private sector. You can start calling several hotels in the South of France and asking around or you can ask comrades if they know where to find a suitable hotel. That all works fine, but I do not know if you have already used Booking.com. That is much faster and it is this same benefit that we want to generate with a tool like INSISTO (6).

Throughout the interviews, several participants gave two concrete examples of how these tools can actually increase the efficiency of the CWP system as a whole. In the first example, some participants stated that these EIS will streamline and replace the paperwork and other cumbersome administrative processes practitioners are faced with. In the second example, policy makers expressed their belief that transferring information quickly and easily throughout EIS will counter the scattered and fragmented youth sector, which is considered a major problem of the Flemish CWP system. One interviewee commented:

> Well, when everyone continues to do his own thing over the telephone; that is not very client-centred and as such, you also keep continuing the fragmentation. That can never lead to customised care, but only to fragmented decisions and sooner or later, we will pay a price for that (13).

At first sight, many interviewees supported these claims. However, beyond this agreement, participants also expressed more nuanced viewpoints. For instance, they acknowledged that CWP practice cannot merely be organised on the basis of EIS just because they might speed up the information-sharing process or increase the efficiency of the CWP system. They asserted that these tools are quasi bureaucratic while

CWP is, in its very essence, concerned with the relational aspect between practitioners and their clients, but also in between practitioners. One interviewee, for example, pointed out that 'You have an evolution, which is determined by law. What you see is something very technocratic, almost bureaucratic in nature, but no one prevents practitioners making a phone call and so on' (3).

Generating information

In the second theme addressed by our interviewees, a similar pattern occurs. Here, policy makers explained that they simply needed to generate and collect detailed and accurate information. According to several of them, generating reliable information is a condition for creating and implementing policy and EIS are perfectly suited to do this. They can, for instance, capture blind spots, allocate subsidies to local CWP organisations and generate more *objective* information. As one of the interviewees commented:

> Health Services are bound to their clients and if these clients really want to submit an application for recognising their disability, it can be hard to refuse. It can be difficult to act as an objective practitioner and say: I'm sorry sir, but your disabilities are not severe enough to recognise them officially as a disability and therefore, we will not submit your application. That is a very difficult message to give. We do not doubt that this message will be given when it concerns critical objective professionals, but that is the reason why we installed a neutral civil service (7).

Interestingly, though, a similar pattern to that in the first theme occurs as there was also a discourse of ambiguity among the interviewees, as some of them exhibited a more questioning attitude. They spoke of seeking a balance between objectivity and rationality on the one hand—all of which can be facilitated through the use of EIS—and responsiveness on the other hand. In other words, they expressed concerns about the narrowing of the social (Aronson and Smith, 2009) and even counted on practitioners' creativity to stretch the rational discourse of these tools. As one of the interviewees pointed out:

> You work in a dialectical framework . . . . You cannot underestimate the resilience and creativity of the practitioner. He will do his own thing with it and he will automatically, out of resilience, try to define his assignment . . . . Whether it is against this tool or another tool, the practitioner will always react against it. Why? From his wisdom, what I would describe as existential wisdom, he knows that these are only fragments of life and that he needs to place these in a larger perspective (10).

This discourse of ambiguity continued as some participants challenged their colleagues' viewpoint of using EIS as an instrument for

monitoring purposes. While interviewees pointed out that these EIS 'can actually monitor how the CWP system is working, how long it takes to pass through and how long a client needs to wait' (9) and, as such, provide information about the actions of professionals, care processes, population evolutions, case trajectories, staffing and cost of the offered care, others expressed their concerns about this particular rationale. In doing so, one participant explicitly points to the need for additional qualitative research before being able to make valuable statements about evolutions in the CWP system. In the words of this participant:

> Of course, you get a global picture of what is going on. Especially when you can collect the data sequentially for a couple of years and you then compare them. Then, you get an idea of how CWP is working, but it will never be merely on the basis of numbers. Numbers alone won't tell you anything. You really have to place them in context (10).

Creating accountability

This tendency of ambiguity continued as a third theme emerged from our analysis, where participants began by explaining how they sought to heighten and secure societal and professional accountability. Concerning the latter, several interviewees expressed hope that EIS would increase the level of participation and co-operation between the practitioner and the client, for instance, by filling in these EIS together. As a result, the practitioners' accountability for that which is taking place in the CWP process is not only immediately shared between the practitioner and the client, but is also made explicit. Here, one of the participants—supported in his opinion by several others—also explained how EIS enable practitioners to generate data that can serve as a basis for conducting—what he called—an objective dialogue with the client. He demonstrated this with a striking example in which he illustrates how data can enable communication in difficult situations and assist practitioners in being held accountable for their decisions. The interviewee illustrated this by placing himself in the role of a practitioner who needs to make a difficult assessment:

> I now have spoken to you two or three times. I have visited you at home, I have investigated your situation and I decided to go to court. When you do that, the client has the right to ask you why. If you actually decide to go to court and you wish to convince your client or the court, it should be substantiated and well-motivated. It is a fundamental right of the client to know on which elements you are building your case. That is a part of the objectification of your assessment (12).

At the same time, participants illustrated how EIS have the ability to meet societal accountability requirements. Apparently, these requirements are decreasingly related to the central task of safeguarding

children in the first place. This is firmly illustrated by some of the participants when argued that, 'in these contemporary times of economic scarcity' (4/5), they have no other choice than to generate data, which can heighten the societal accountability of the CWP system as a whole. One interviewee commented:

> I guess my core message is very similar to what I said earlier. It is so important that we heighten our societal accountability, especially in times of scarcity, but not only in times of scarcity. 360 million euro is a lot of money and we must say what we do with it (4/5).

Interestingly, some participants argue that—besides this demand for financial accountability—they also experience a contemporary societal climate that is highly influenced by a control and risk management paradigm in which public perceptions of risk are omnipresent. According to them, contemporary society believes that by gathering the right information, CWP will be able to respond immediately and appropriately to children who are potentially at risk as well as to report and document their interventions for the sake of accountability. One of the interviewees explained:

> I think we have to admit that our society is organised in a way that it wants to control. They (society) shun the risks and they always jump on cases where apparently something went wrong. So from a policy perspective, but also from a societal perspective, there is without any doubt the question of: what have you done to avoid this case and what are the measures you took. So a kind of control flush has arisen that makes you obliged to know things. And this does mean that the practitioner himself should have a well-substantiated file. It is a duty to be accountable, a duty to motivate why (s)he undertook those actions and no others (14).

When deepening this quest for accountability during the interviews, some participants again expressed a more questioning attitude towards this development. They developed a discourse in which they stated that society should recognise that CWP intrinsically operates in a highly unpredictable and uncertain climate and that processes of predetermination, uniformisation and proceduralisation, all of which are facilitated through the use of EIS, might impair social work as a responsive profession. Or, in the words of one interviewee:

> The first thing you get from a policy perspective is a reflex of control. And of course, there is a tension between that reflex of control and the individual freedom of practitioners. I really consider that to be a subject for a societal debate. But, what I notice at the moment is that there is a lack of courage from the press, Parliament and from policymakers to say: my shoulders are broad enough and we have to accept that CWP operates in a climate where risks are inevitable. That is definitely not the case at the moment (14).

In other words, during the interviews, participants—from their specific position as policy makers—not only sought to legitimise the use of EIS from a more governmental perspective by uncovering a diversity of rationales for installing EIS; they also explained how practitioners ought to handle these EIS in day-to-day practice. In doing so, they developed a strong discourse of ambiguity by fleshing out how they expect practitioners to move back and forth between governmental demands and procedures on the one hand and the day-to-day reality of the CWP system on the other hand. Therefore, in our discussion, we elaborate further on both of these issues and the relation between them.

Discussion and concluding reflections

The thoughts and views of the policy makers give insight into an often neglected governmental perspective by generating a broad diversity of findings, which provide an in-depth insight into the multifaceted process of policy making. In doing so, these findings reveal the complex struggle for articulating consistent reasons for the implementation of EIS. Asked about the underlying rationales for installing these tools, policy makers spoke of a variety of administrative, policy, care and economic rationales. From an administrative-oriented perspective, they seek to speed up the CWP process by transferring information more quickly and replacing paperwork. From a policy-oriented perspective, they expect these EIS to better match care supply and care demand as well to generate and collect detailed and accurate information concerning existing blind spots and ongoing evolutions regarding the CWP population. From a care-oriented perspective, these policy makers seek to increase client participation, reduce risks and monitor the actions undertaken by professionals. From an economic-oriented perspective, they expect to increase the efficiency of the CWP system, avoid unnecessary investments in non-working methods, allocate subsidies, monitor the cost of staffing and heighten societal financial accountability. These rationales are not necessarily new and confirm earlier findings (see Devlieghere and Roose, 2015). At the same time, these rationales—although they can even be driven by a concern for the client—seem to align with the idea that policy makers are actually attempting 'to pre-structure practice through a belief in the monotheistic privilege of procedure' (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010, p. 1060) and that they are relying on more formal methods, such as EIS, to do so. In other words, these rationales seem to confirm the contemporary idea that policy makers believe they can increase efficiency, enhance transparency and cut the costs of public spending through the use of EIS. In doing so, they even seem to present themselves as one monolithic entity, aligning with managerial tendencies which social work has to face.

However, and this is of critical relevance for our discussion, our findings have uncovered a more nuanced viewpoint. Throughout the interviews, policy makers not only sought to legitimise the use of EIS by illustrating their importance for the field of CWP. They also aptly expressed a more critical viewpoint about the idea of developing a more responsive CWP practice through the use of these EIS. Many of them, for instance, expressed an intense questioning attitude towards the idea of using EIS to reduce the amount of risks in CWP or to pre-structure and even rationalise or objectify social work practice as they stated that social work primarily remains a therapeutical and dialectical practice. Participants even raised questions concerning the usefulness of these systems and the way these systems ought to be used, hoping that practitioners would move back and forth between governmental demands on the one hand and the day-to-day realities in which they are immersed on the other hand in order to establish a more responsive social work. Paradoxically, at the same time and from their specific position as policy makers, these policy makers also advocated the use of EIS by social work organisations and practitioners. This leads to an interesting but extremely ambiguous situation in which policy makers seem to be both strong supporters and critics of EIS at the same time. In doing so, they emphasise the importance of EIS for increasing efficiency, generating information and increasing accountability and at the same time point out the disadvantages of these EIS as they are perceived to be bureaucratic, too rational and unable to capture social work day-to-day reality.

While revealing this discourse of ambiguity, policy makers often referred to a contemporary societal climate in which the societal demand for financial accountability as well as for a CWP system where risks are being minimised has increased substantially over the last few years (Carrilio, 2008). According to these policy makers, gathering the right information will enable them to meet these societal aspirations and heighten their own societal accountability. As a result, they emphasised that practitioners need to provide extensive data about what they are doing (Carrilio, 2008) through the use of strict, preordained and preferably uniform EIS. In this sense, neo-institutional theory might provide valuable insights since it provides insight into how public perceptions are becoming the mainspring for creating policy, while policy makers themselves are expressing a rather critical attitude (Villadsen and Mik-Meyer, 2013), as illustrated through our findings. This theory aptly describes how organisations, including governments, are in need of appearing in legitimate ways to the environment with which it interacts, in this particular case: society. In doing so, governments and policy makers are in need of creating strategies and methods to appear as legitimate actors. In this particular case, EIS are perfectly suited to this task, since they convey the impression of a government whose knowledge base for creating policy is rational, objective and based on the data they collect.

As a result, technological instruments such as EIS are afforded a mythical status in which they are presented as rational, transparent and objective, regardless of what they actually do in day-to-day practice. According to Villadsen and Mik-Meyer (2013), this need for creating myths to increase societal accountably is not new, but conspicuously apparent in areas such as CWP, since they often 'produce "products" that are difficult to quantify' (Villadsen and Mik-Meyer, 2013, p. 91). According to them, 'such organisations tend to be evaluated on the basis of whether they use legitimate institutionalised elements' (Villadsen and Mik-Meyer, 2013, p. 91), such as EIS, regardless of their effect in social work practice.

In other words, these findings seem to constitute evidence of governmental window dressing by illustrating how policy enhances the use of EIS, while at the same time policy makers are uncovering a more critical viewpoint and counting on practitioners to handle these EIS with care. This in turn raises serious questions for social work and social work practice. This is especially the case since contemporary literature puts the emphasis on how practitioners should assert their discretion through developing strategies of resistance against possible undesirable and non-responsive consequences of governmental policy (Aronson and Smith, 2009; Roets *et al.*, 2016). Here, Aronson and Smith (2009) refer to the development of micropolitics of resistance in which practitioners and organisations (Evans, 2011) develop strategies such as going underground 'in which social workers try to disorganise organisational imperatives and unsettle narrowly functional practices that are structured by managerial ideologies while intruding on what matters to families' (Roets *et al.*, 2016, p. 11). In doing so, they sometimes construct activities without informing anyone else about them (Roets *et al.*, 2016), become creative in bending the rules (Aronson and Smith, 2009) or pretend to follow regulations while actually evading them and doing something completely different (De Vos, 2015). Paradoxically, our findings challenge this view through exposing how the current emphasis on the everyday resistance of practitioners against government policy is giving insufficient attention to the governmental ambiguity in which policy makers themselves are developing similar strategies of resistance by, for instance, expressing hope that practitioners will move back and forth between governmental demands and procedures on the one hand and the day-to-day reality of the CWP system on the other, articulating their disbelief in the possibilities of EIS to develop a more responsive social work. As a consequence, we argue that, while most of these EIS were developed to create transparency, they seem to create a lot of ambiguity and concerns—not only on the level of social work practice, but also on the level of social policy. This, in turn, throws a different light on the tension between regulation and policy making on the one hand and the position and role of social work and social workers on the other. It

might create opportunities for social work to act as a force for social transformation, especially since it is no longer needed to perceive the government as a monolithic entity, but rather as an area of diversity and ambiguity which is developing its own strategies for developing a more responsive social work, together, although in a different way, with social work practice. The question here though remains: how a development towards a more responsive social work practice may arise while operating in these fields of ambiguity. This is, however, a captivating field of interest, which needs to be explored in more depth in the future.

Study limitations

Interpretation of the findings needs to consider the following study limitation. The sample of the policy actors is small and, although this sample seems quite representative for the Flemish policy context of CWP, especially since the aim of the research was to achieve an in-depth exploration of the policy rationales, rather than a general enumeration, the generalisability of the findings to other countries cannot be assumed. We therefore recommend that similar studies be carried out in other countries.

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